

THE  
MANUAL ALPHABET

AS A

PART OF THE PUBLIC-SCHOOL COURSE.

BY

JAMES DENISON, M.A.,

PRINCIPAL OF THE KENDALL SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF, WASHINGTON, D. C.

---

*Reprinted from the American Annals of the Deaf, October, 1886.*

---

WASHINGTON, D. C.

GIBSON BROS., PRINTERS AND BOOKBINDERS.

1886.



THE  
MANUAL ALPHABET

AS A

PART OF THE PUBLIC-SCHOOL COURSE.

BY

JAMES DENISON, M.A.,

PRINCIPAL OF THE KENDALL SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF, WASHINGTON, D. C.

---

*Reprinted from the American Annals of the Deaf, October, 1886.*

---

WASHINGTON, D. C.

GIBSON BROS., PRINTERS AND BOOKBINDERS.

1886.



## THE MANUAL ALPHABET AS A PART OF THE PUBLIC-SCHOOL COURSE.

[THIS paper was read at the Eleventh Convention of American Instructors of the Deaf, held at the California Institution, Berkeley, Cal., July 15-23, 1886, and by vote of the Convention the Executive Committee was instructed to publish it for circulation. It was therefore printed in the *American Annals of the Deaf* for October, 1886, and is now reprinted separately.]

In some English magazine I remember reading a few years ago a story to the following effect :

A burglar, intent upon robbery, had obtained entrance to a bed-room, where the lady of the house, awaked from sleep by the noise of his movements, was intimidated from giving an alarm by his fierce threats of violence. Hearing footsteps approaching, the robber concealed himself behind the bed, first cautioning the occupant that the least whisper of his presence would be at the risk of her life. The husband entered, unsuspecting of the fact that, from his place of concealment, the robber, with levelled pistol and finger on trigger, was breathlessly watching and listening.

The situation was full of peril—more easily imagined than described. The least allusion to the truth might have been instant death to the beloved husband, and probably to the wife also.

Now it had happened that in their younger days they had learned the manual alphabet of the deaf, and had frequently since, as occasion suggested, communicated with each other by it. Unseen by the robber, the lady gave her husband on her fingers an inkling of the state of matters. He took in the situation at a glance—literally at a glance—and making a misleading remark about something he had forgotten to bring, he was out of the room and in a moment back again with fire-arms and assistance, and the burglar was captured, and robbery and possible murder prevented : and this by the manual alphabet,

an accomplishment easily and carelessly learned years before, with no thought of its future employment in such an emergency.

This case, extreme as it may seem, only illustrates the general rule that in daily life circumstances are constantly arising in which there is an imperative necessity of saying something directly to the person most interested in a way not to attract too greatly the undesired attention of others, and of saying it quickly, perspicaciously, felicitously, without using the voice.

Writing is a medium of communication that answers these purposes at certain moments, and on certain occasions. It is undoubtedly an indispensable medium where distance, exactitude of statement, future reference, extent of matter, are to be considered. There is no need of enlarging upon this phase of its usefulness; it is universally acknowledged.

There are indisputably times and places in which the finger-alphabet fulfils, as writing cannot do it, the conditions of expression where vocal utterance is either not desirable or not possible; where to use pen or pencil would be either an inconvenience, a waste of time, or a sheer impossibility.

How often at social gatherings—I am not alluding to the deaf in this connection—do we not see individuals, separated from each other by the crowd or the length of the room, vainly striving, by bewildering contortions of the countenance or noddings of the head, to convey a piece of information upon which may hinge the ease and pleasure of the evening. Repeatedly it must have occurred to the looker-on, as he noticed the mortification or blank disappointment depicted upon their faces at the futility of their attempts to reach a common understanding, that the finger-alphabet would have furnished them with a means of perfectly accomplishing that object without attracting undesirable attention by uncouth gestures, or obliging them to make themselves conspicuous by raising the voice beyond the proper pitch.

Probably no one has ever left a promiscuous gathering of any kind without recalling an unfortunate moment, made so by a lapse of memory, or some misinformation as to the name, identity, or profession of a person interviewed, where the use of the finger-alphabet on the part of a kindly-disposed third person would have saved him from an awkward blunder.

In concerts, where music has charms to still every other sound; in the church, where any other voice than that from pulpit or choir would shock the congregation from centre to circumference; in the theatre, where the owner of a voice in orchestra

or gallery finds himself the focus of a hundred lorgnettes ; and again, amid the noise and rattle of the machine shop, factory, or railroad, how often arises an imperious necessity of making a communication to another. How handy—old Saxon word this, but pat to the purpose, is it not ?—How handy at such times and in such places would come the manual alphabet, achieving the end sought for completely, and without the least friction or disturbance !

Outside of the confessedly deaf, how many persons there are who, resenting with warmth the imputation of not being the possessors of a perfect auditory apparatus, are yet hardly ever addressed except in tones more or less raised above the conversational pitch. Often in certain situations the recollection of the fact that the voice must be thus heightened is an effectual preventive of anything being said at all. Thus timely, pleasurable, or valuable information has been withheld when the finger-alphabet could and would have put it where it would have done the most good.

To the invalid and to the sick room the manual alphabet comes, as it were, with healing on its wings. Has not every home its sick room dedicated to the goddess of perfect quiet, every family its invalid, a sort of living original of the marble statue of silence with finger forever on lip ? •How the sound of the human voice, be it ever so modulated and repressed, racks the ear of the nervous sick one ! How the whisper of the nurse or the subdued tones of the physician startle him from the repose upon which his recovery depends, and turn his thoughts into channels that lead to apprehension and despondency ! How perfectly, how beautifully, the manual alphabet performs its functions here ; every weary nerve in the sufferer's body cries out, " God bless it !" And again, on the other hand, when the invalid is incapacitated by disease or exhaustion from using his voice, what a solace to him and his attendants it is if he can still express his wants by the silent, unlaborious motion of his fingers.

In this connection it is not out of place to refer to a more solemn subject—that of the death bed. Some of you who have stood by the dying ere the soul has taken its flight may recall—and with what feelings I will not say—that last appealing look and those vain endeavors of the departing one to express some final desire. It is a well-known fact that the vocal chords give way long before the muscles of the hand ; the dying man is " speechless," while his fingers move at will. How many last

messages to be treasured thenceforth as a most precious heritage have been lost to the loving ones remaining behind—lost because the finger-alphabet was not known.

Members of the family of Dr. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet have told me that in his last moments such precious and ever to be remembered messages continued to come from his fingers after his tongue was paralyzed in death. The same may be said of the Rev. B. M. Fay, father of Professor Fay of Kendall Green, who passed away last year; of Grace Aguilar, known to us through her “Days of Bruce,” “Home Influence,” and other writings, of whom the *Annals*\* says: “In her final illness, when the power of speech was gone, she conversed with her friends in the manual alphabet, and her last words thus expressed were, ‘Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.’” Dr. Harvey P. Peet, in an obituary notice of Martha Dudley in the same periodical,† states the same fact as regards her last hours, and mentions at the same time how “Mrs. Peet, after she became wholly speechless, spelled with her fingers distinctly the word ‘Mother,’ which incident is commemorated in a touching little poem of Mrs. Sigourney, ‘The last word of the dying.’”

Thus far I have mentioned only a tithe of the circumstances in which a knowledge of the manual alphabet would be an advantage—I may say, an immeasurable advantage—to hearing people. A moment’s thought will suggest to any one so many further illustrations to the same effect that there would not be space or time to give them all.

I must, however, mention one more. The finger-alphabet possesses acknowledged and, in the opinion of those familiar with its use, an unequalled excellence as a means of education in orthography. The care and deliberation with which the letters are formed, and the concentration of mind that the process involves, insure precision beyond any other method.

At Kendall Green, and possibly at other places similarly situated in regard to schools for the deaf, where the hearing children of the locality are formed into little schools for private instruction, the finger-alphabet has been practically and successfully tested in this respect. The teachers like it. “It makes the pupil so particular,” they say. I have in mind now children of deaf parents, early used to this alphabet, who, on entering public schools, easily led their classes in spelling, to the wonderment of their teachers until the reason was explained.

---

\* Vol. xvii, page 132.

† Vol. v, p. 81.



Once more I have recourse to the *Annals* :\*

“ It was a favorite idea of the late Rev. T. H. Gallaudet, the lamented illustrious pioneer of deaf-mute education in this country, that the practice of spelling words with the manual alphabet, even by hearing and speaking children, might be made very serviceable to them, by familiarizing them with the correct orthography of words aside from the use of the ear. The principle upon which the idea is based we think to be this : The more varied the form under which language is presented to the mind through the different senses, the more perfect will be the knowledge of it acquired, and the more permanently will it be retained.”

In view of the incontestably great usefulness of the manual alphabet to the hearing, and considering the comparatively little labor and time needed to acquire it, has not the day arrived when some determined effort should be made to adopt it into the public-school system of the country? Should not this matter be urged upon the attention of teachers and boards of trustees of the public schools? Could not they be persuaded to hang charts of the manual alphabet on the walls of their school-rooms, with cuts large enough to be seen without effort from the farthest corner? Could not they be led to try the experiment of using this alphabet as a means of drill in spelling instead of the present method of writing out long lists of words? The same course, by the way, might be found useful in recitations in geography.

Would not the school-room work move on in smoother grooves, with less jar to nerve and temper, if a pupil, instead of speaking aloud and thus distracting the attention of others from their studies, simply spelled out on his hand a request or a question to the teacher? Would not the teacher himself feel more satisfaction in making a remark to a pupil in this way, having once caught his eye, than in interrupting the work of a whole class to do it?

The objection may be made that the result would be a demoralization of discipline; that pupils will have still another means of talking in school regardless of rules. To this it might be answered that there will always be more or less of this unauthorized interchange of ideas in every school-room; and that if it should be carried on through the finger-alphabet there would be less disturbance than if any other medium were em-

---

\* David E. Bartlett, *Annals*, vol. v, page 33.

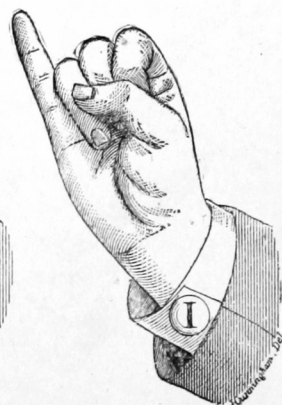
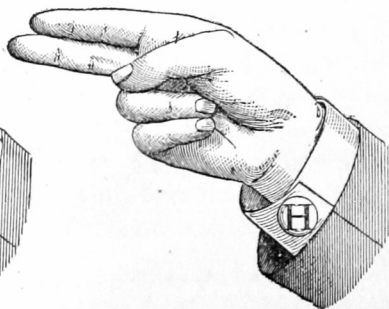
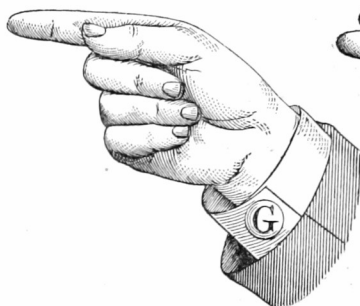
ployed. But in truth the teacher possesses a check on the abuse of the manual alphabet in the fact that he is himself skilled in its use, and can tell what his pupils may be saying. A teacher in the High School at Washington informs me that all unlawful attempts of this sort ceased at once when his pupils found that their remarks were no riddle to him.

In keeping this matter within legitimate bounds, everything, of course, depends upon whether the teacher has tact, influence, character. Lacking these qualities, he has no right to be where and what he is. With them, he is sure of commanding the respect and obedience of his pupils for whatever regulations his judgment may lead him to make. Where the manual alphabet is employed, as it is in schools for the deaf, its use is under proper control. Why need the case be different elsewhere?

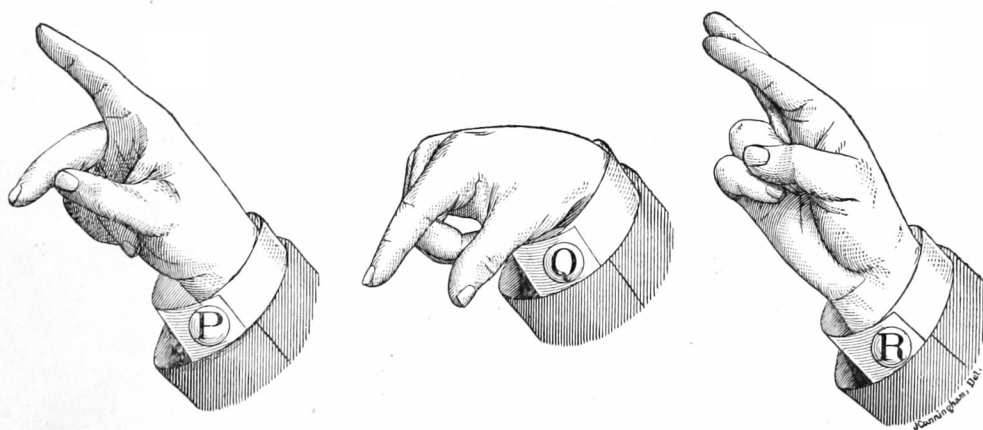
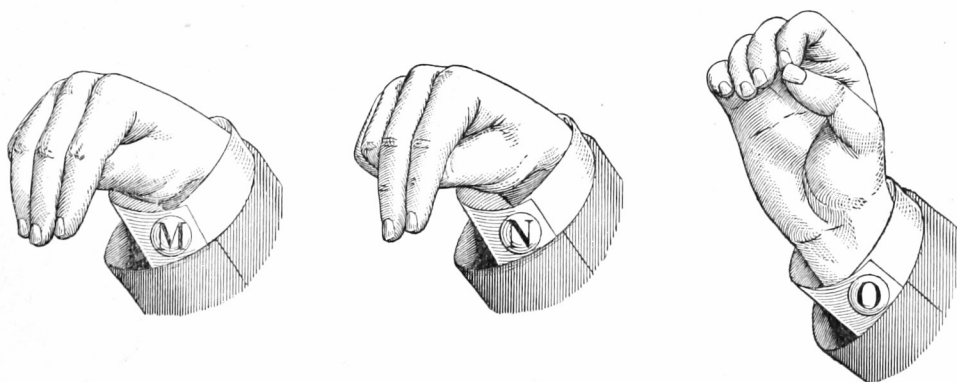
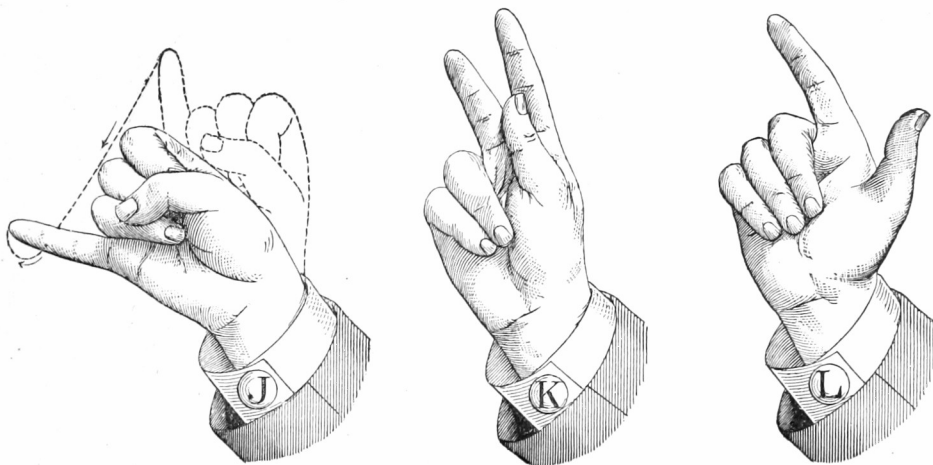
If, thus far, I have failed to expatiate upon the benefit—great beyond conception—that the introduction of the manual alphabet into the schools of the hearing would confer upon the deaf-mute himself, it is because this is something that needs only to be suggested to be recognized in all its force and extent. When we think how the general use of the manual alphabet would throw wide open the doors of communication between the deaf-mute and the hearing—doors that now open with difficulty and close again almost as soon as opened; when with the mind's eye we see the deaf child's intellect and heart unfolding from tender years in the sunlight of knowledge under conditions more analogous to those of his hearing playmate; when we behold the deaf adult, wherever he finds himself, whether in places of business, in political meetings, in religious assemblies, in social gatherings, placed in perfect unison with his neighbors and surroundings; when we realize that he moves among his peers with no feeling of isolation; when we know that there may be more instances than heretofore in which "the charm of waving hands," but without the evil taint of the charm that Vivien wiled away from Merlin, shall knit together for life the heart of the deaf and that of the hearing, how can we, as members of our noble profession, hesitate to give our vote, individually and collectively, for the general diffusion of the manual alphabet through the public-school system of the country? No; let us not hesitate; let us not even doubt:

Our doubts are traitors,  
And make us lose the good we oft might win,  
By fearing to attempt.

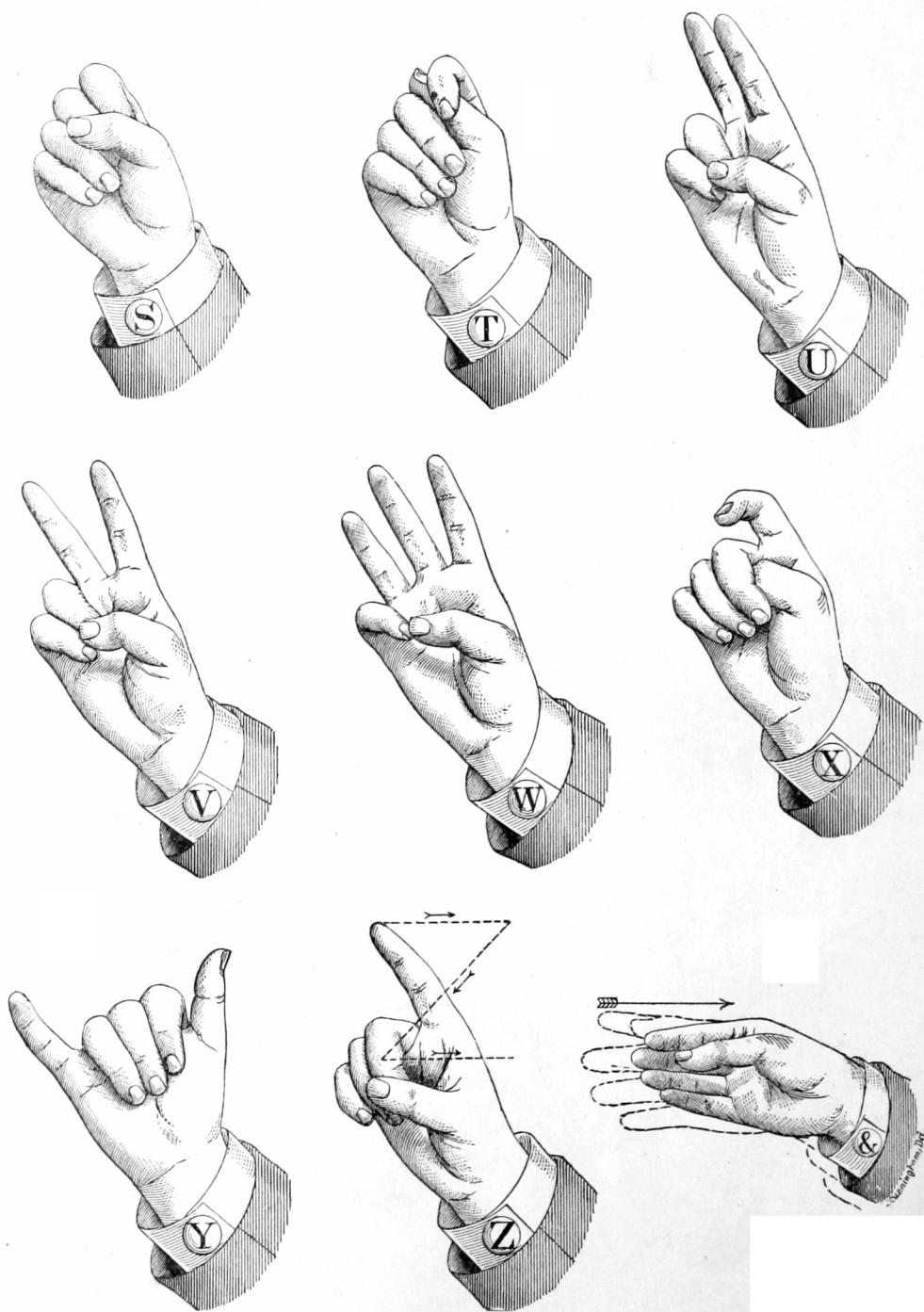
The manual alphabet presented on the following pages, which is the one generally used in the schools for the deaf in the United States, was drawn and engraved from photographs under the direction of Professor J. C. Gordon, of the National Deaf-Mute College, Washington, D. C., to accompany his "Notes on Manual Spelling," published in the *American Annals of the Deaf* for January, 1886. "It represents typical positions of the fingers, hand, and fore-arm from a uniform point of view in front of the person spelling, or as seen in a large mirror by the user himself. It can be learned in less than an hour, and many have learned it by extraordinary application in ten minutes. It is recommended that the arm be held in an easy position near the body, with the fore-arm as in the plates. Each letter should be mastered before leaving it. Speed will come with use; it should not be attempted nor permitted until the forms of the letters and the appropriate positions of the hand are thoroughly familiar. The forms as given are legible from the distant parts of a public hall. In colloquial use the fingers need not be so closely held, nor firmly flexed, as represented, but sprawling should be avoided. It is not necessary to move the arm, but a slight leverage at the elbow is conducive to ease and is permissible, provided the hand delivers the letters steadily within an imaginary immovable ring of, say, ten inches in diameter."



[*The one-hand Alphabet in general use.—Front view.*]



[*The one-hand Alphabet in general use.—Front view.*]



[The one-hand Alphabet in general use.—Front view.]





THE AMERICAN ANNALS OF THE DEAF is a quarterly publication, appearing in the months of January, April, July, and October. Each number contains at least sixty-four pages of matter, principally original. The subscription price is \$2.00 a year, payable in advance. For foreign subscribers the price, postage included, is 9 shillings or marken, (11 francs or lire,) which may be sent through the postal money-order office. Subscriptions and all other communications relating to the *Annals* should be addressed to the Editor,

E. A. FAY,  
*National Deaf-Mute College,*  
*Kendall Green,*  
WASHINGTON, D. C.